

KYRGYZSTAN: A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM BASED ON INTER-ELITE CONSENSUS

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Abstract: This article argues that Kyrgyzstan's new constitution, which strengthens the parliament's powers, is mainly the result of an informal pact among multiple influential political figures who came to office in 2010. The new, regulated political environment, although largely dominated by neopatrimonial interests, has nevertheless produced the first signs of genuine political debate and fair competition. Should this trend continue, the party- and coalition-building processes will yield a more sophisticated political landscape in time for the next election. In a pessimistic scenario, this constitutional experiment will lead to even more hollow institutions and stronger reliance on patronage networks.

Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian state to transfer presidential power through competitive elections.¹ Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has seen the rise of a diverse civil society, opposition parties,

¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided helpful critiques on a draft of this article.

and independent media, something that neighboring states still largely lack. Yet Kyrgyzstan is often described as a failing state, where informal patronage networks overshadow any formal bureaucracy and weaken the economy.² Kyrgyzstan's political liberalization—following two violent regime changes in less than a decade and the adoption of a parliamentary system of governance—has yet to strengthen state institutions and establish effective governance.

This article argues that Kyrgyzstan's new constitution, which allows various political forces to compete in free elections and stage debates inside parliament, is mainly the result of an informal pact among multiple political figures who captured power in March 2005 and then again in April 2010. This consensus among the key political players does not directly contribute to state building and good governance, but the highly competitive parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010 and 2011, respectively, allowed these players to continue their political struggle as legitimate actors. The new constitution presumes that Kyrgyz political actors are driven by neopatrimonial links and therefore seeks to regulate them to the extent that no one political network captures too much power.

With this argument in mind, this article offers three interrelated propositions. First, the 2010 constitution introduces new rules of competition for old political players with solid economic and political resources. In the 2010 elections, all political players had nearly equal opportunities in competing for parliamentary representation and the most powerful of them prevailed. Second, Kyrgyzstan today is an example of how formal rules can transform and regulate neopatrimonial politics: although fierce political struggle often revolves around business interests, the new constitution both facilitates and restricts competition among power holders. Finally, it will take at least another cycle of competitive elections before we can judge whether Kyrgyzstan's current political system will gradually promote the evolution of good governance through increased transparency and competition. In the meantime, current political forces will seek to survive in this competitive, yet regulated, environment by adopting new strategies of political struggle.

I approach the main argument and the three related propositions by drawing on studies of neopatrimonial states in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. The article will proceed in three parts. First, I examine the concept of a neopatrimonial state and its applicability to Kyrgyzstan. Second,

² Johan Engvall. 2011. "Flirting with State Failure: Power and Politics in Kyrgyzstan since Independence." *Silk Road Paper*. Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1107Engvall.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2012), July; David Trilling. 2011. "Kyrgyzstan Tottering Down Failed States Index." *Eurasianet.org*, June 21; Eric McGlinchey. "Running in Circles in Kyrgyzstan." *New York Times*. April 10, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/10/opinion/10mcglinchey.html> (accessed June 24, 2012).

I decipher the political environment in Kyrgyzstan at the time the new constitution was adopted. Here I describe the new laws that create the conditions for fair and competitive elections, coalition building, and regulating the balance of power between the president and parliament. Lastly, I will show how various players seek to increase their own power by using or challenging these rules and the opposition they face from civil society. The empirical data supporting the arguments come from numerous interviews with current and former members of parliament, as well as government officials. The analysis is also a result of an in-person observation of the Interim Government, parliament and various government agencies during the period between April 2010 and June 2012.

Regulated Neopatrimonialism in Kyrgyzstan

In the literature on neopatrimonialism, the phenomenon is essentially characterized as hybrid relations that are based on both the legal-rational bureaucracy as well as the patrimonial networks identified by Weber.³ In a neopatrimonial state, political relations are contingent upon private interests, personal connections, favors, promises, and privileges. As a result, policy production and implementation follow personal interests and connections, while officials blur the distinction between personal and universal gains.⁴ Neopatrimonial networks embrace nepotism, clientelism, and corruption—all present within the boundaries of the formal state. Any market development in such states is designed to meet the rulers' needs and overshadows formal regulations.⁵

Neopatrimonialism is well studied in authoritarian states where the head of state, although elected, relies on both a formal bureaucracy and patronage networks to sustain his hold on power. In centralized political regimes where only one political party has the right to both govern and gain profit, patronage networks are much stronger.⁶ The party has no need to admit other players and is interested solely in expanding its own wealth and power. Informal politics become more ingrained than formal rules, and the state bureaucracy largely ceases to function effectively at all levels of government.

³ Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel. 2007. "Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept." *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 45:1: 95-119; Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle. 1994. "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa." *World Politics* 46:4, 453-489; Max Weber. 1968. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. New York: Bedminster Press.

⁴ Eric Budd. 2004. *Democratization, Development, and the Patrimonial State in the Age of Globalization*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

⁵ C. Clapham. 1982. "Clientelism and the State." In C. Clapham, ed. *Private Patronage and Public Power*. London: Frances Pinter.

⁶ Nicholas Kunysz. 2012. "From Sultanism to Neopatrimonialism? Regionalism within Turkmenistan." *Central Asian Survey* 31:1, 1-16.

Since Kyrgyzstan is not an authoritarian state, research on some multiparty African and Eastern European countries provides a better framework for analysis. Importantly, this body of literature helps us to understand the interplay between some elements of democracy, such as free, fair and frequent elections, and weak state institutions. Studies of political party formation and state-building in Eastern Europe demonstrate that state administrations are likely to facilitate the rise of patronage networks when electoral competition takes place in a state that is weak and not consolidated.⁷ Power-hungry parties will adapt bureaucracies to grab as many resources as possible in order to prevail in the next election. "Because electoral competition was introduced *before* the consolidation of the postcommunist state administrations, the door was [left] open to patronage politics, enabling underdeveloped and resource-hungry parties to raid the administration for their own party-building," according to O'Dwyer's summary of the East European experience.⁸ As a result, the state is used as a party-building instrument, rather than parties working to build the state. Party membership becomes a means for attaining economic benefits and can be driven by business, ethnic or familial contacts rather than professional qualifications.

Studies of Ghana, one of the few African states that managed to build a multiparty system, reveal how elections may in fact reinforce neopatrimonial ties within state institutions, particularly within the parliament.⁹ Lindberg explains that, in Ghana, neopatrimonial relations do not necessarily need to be reproduced as a result of fraudulent elections. On the contrary, well-organized, competitive elections allow political party leaders to increase the stakes for the new members and to recruit only those individuals who can contribute to victory. Party lists are ordered based on who can donate the most financial and political resources to the electoral campaign. Between elections, political competition revolves around MPs as they dole out favors to their supporters instead of producing relevant policies. In such a "distributive democracy," MPs serve the needs of their constituency by handing out resources and gifts, not by looking for long-term solutions to vexing policy problems. MPs and government officials do not necessarily align around common interests to remain in power and to continue protecting personal business interests; rather they also seek to check the growing power of their competitors. The formal bureaucracy becomes the most efficient way of sustaining one's own capital, while political competition becomes one arena within a broader fight for resources.

⁷ Conor O'Dwyer. 2006. *Runaway State-Building: Patronage Politics and Democratic Development*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ Staffan I. Lindberg. 2003. "It's Our Time to 'Chop': Do Elections in Africa Feed Neopatrimonialism rather than Counter-Act It?" *Democratization* 10:2,121-140.

Neopatrimonial-based politics have been largely overlooked in the literature on Central Asia. Instead, instances of corruption and clientelism are often seen as expressions of solidarity among groups of people connected by identifiable clans.¹⁰ For example, Ilkhamov argues that while patron-client relations in Uzbekistan can be based on kinship, they often go beyond clannish identity and involve the heads of more than one family. He further argues that clan and familial identities often become salient when they promise to yield privileges and resources. For the most part, however, it is the individuals who already occupy state posts who will play patrimonial networks to boost their own political influence.

Like in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's political forces have little interest in uniting around clan or kinship ties; rather political alliances are brokered between officials who will not threaten the network's business interests. Bonds based on non-family ties lead to greater political leverage and often play a far larger role than kinship.¹¹ These connections can be based on shared workplaces, joint business interests, inter-family contacts, or common political interest in specific issues. For example, an entrepreneur who owns a retail outlet chain in Bishkek would be interested in joining whichever political party that could ensure the adoption of business-friendly policies. By contrast, familial, clan and tribal identities are often viewed as important features of everyday life (weddings, funerals, etc.) rather than being defining features of the political domain.

One major difference between Kyrgyzstan and single-party Central Asian states is that Kyrgyzstan's neopatrimonial networks are considerably more fluid and therefore more unpredictable than elsewhere in the region. Economic resources are controlled by several competing regional elites who wish to increase their own political leverage over competitors. The presence of strong political competition propels network leaders to create codes of conduct for their members. Major political players want to institutionalize these de facto regulations to increase predictability and decrease insecurity in competitions over public offices. During the first two years of the parliament's operation under the new constitution, the MPs changed the voting rules and loosened party membership requirements. According to these new regulations, a MP needs to be present in order to cast a vote, while MPs wishing to leave their fraction do not lose their mandate.

That said, Kyrgyzstan's experience shows that the presence of some competition is an important factor when writing the rules of the informal networks to avoid a chaotic situation in which everyone risks losing. All players realize that centralizing power in the hands of one group can make

¹⁰ Alisher Ilkhamov. 2007. "Neopatrimonialism, Interest Groups and Patronage Networks: The Impasses of the Governance System in Uzbekistan." *Central Asian Survey* 26:1, 65-84.

¹¹ David Gullette. 2010. *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and 'Tribalism'*. Kent: Global Oriental.

it possible for the dominant group to strip resources away from all the other players. The new constitution protects the privileges of the opposition by creating conditions for formal competition. Because the current constitution has allowed all interested political forces to participate in parliamentary elections, the parliament represents all of the most dominant political groups, with only a few powerful actors left outside of the legislature.

In rough terms, it is possible to delineate Kyrgyzstan's neopatrimonial networks into three broad categories. First, there are networks based on the leaders of various parliamentary factions. Most parties contain more than one neopatrimonial network. Ata-Jurt, Ata-Meken, and Ar-Namys have all revealed such internal divides. These personal networks cross party lines and unite members of parliament from different parties but with similar business interests. Second, neopatrimonial networks stem from political forces not represented in the parliament. Adakhan Madumarov's Butun Kyrgyzstan party, which failed to enter parliament in the 2010 elections and sought to unite with Ata-Jurt in early 2012, is the primary example of such a force. Finally, these networks arise from non-political sources, mostly business ventures closely tied to political officials.

Patrimonial networks inside Kyrgyzstan's parliament are often labeled as "northern" and "southern" political forces. These networks are by no means based on familial ties, but are strictly contingent to regional identity.¹² While the leaders of some parties come mostly from southern Kyrgyzstan, they have found more shared interests with politicians from the north.¹³ Moreover, rather than serving as a party axis, "southern" MPs are represented in all of the parties and at times unite to promote their own candidates for key government positions. Rallying "southern" support to nominate Akhmadbek Keldibekov, a member of the Ata-Jurt party, to be speaker of parliament in 2011 is one such example.¹⁴ Likewise, in December 2010, it was mostly "southern" MPs who blocked Omurbek Tekebayev's bid for the speaker's role. The alignment along a "southern" identity seems particularly strong compared to the "northern" faction in parliament. To date there have been no visible manifestations of a

¹² Pauline Jones Luong. 2002. *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press; Gullette argues that politicians use regional identities to manipulate voters into voting for them.

¹³ The second coalition formed in December 2010 included Ata-Jurt

¹⁴ Ata-Jurt is regarded as a party representing southern Kyrgyzstan precisely because the bulk of its top members are from Jalalabad and Osh oblasts. Ar-Namys, led by Felix Kulov, is regarded as the most "multiethnic party" because it recruited ethnic Russians, Uzbeks, and russified Kyrgyz for its party lists. Respublika and SDPK are led by "northerners" who try to distance themselves from regional and ethnic divides. Politicians from the north also populate the parties' mid-level ranks.

“northern” alliance against southern political forces. That said, however, “southern” MPs have also clashed on a number of issues such as control over resources in Osh and Jalalabad oblasts.¹⁵ It is therefore possible to assume that regional identities matter when all other options to prevail in the competition for choice political posts are exhausted.

On the local level, however, where resources are limited and competition is less dynamic, patrimonial relations may unravel with or without formal state institutions. For example, Melis Myrzakhmatov, the infamous mayor of Osh, allegedly controls the licit and illicit economic resources in his town and oblast, but his realm does not contain rival localities. The mayor almost entirely relies on a private army of martial arts enthusiasts to provide security, while his office is composed of loyalists or family members. In the March 2012 local elections, Myrzakhmatov’s newly formed Uluttuk Birimdigi party was able to maintain his hold on power largely thanks to the support of Ata-Jurt and Butun Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ Similar to Myrzakhmatov, the local officials have no incentive to follow formal rules and will likely align with whoever dominates on the national scene.

“Revolutions” and the Emergence of New Rules

Political competition in Kyrgyzstan is much more dynamic compared with neighboring states because of the nature of its national economy. Former president Askar Akayev introduced a loosely regulated market economy in the early to mid-1990s. This market produced a group of powerful entrepreneurs who later developed political ambitions. Later on, neither Akayev, nor his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was able to strip those entrepreneurs of their financial power and political influence. The violent struggle between powerful elites over political power and economic resources is often seen as the main cause for the regime changes that took place in 2005 and 2010.

The overthrow of Akayev in March 2005 was widely interpreted as the product of opposition elites vying for power and access to economic resources. Radnitz argues that the 2005 regime change was largely masterminded by competing political elites who, in turn, were seeking to protect their personal interests. Wealthy opposition leaders, according to this view, used ordinary citizens to stage protests and generate popular anger toward the regime. Radnitz details how in 2005 wealthy, power-hungry political elites mobilized local communities to exert pressure on the ruling regime.¹⁷ “Material concerns” served as a strong unifying factor for opposition elites,

¹⁵ Interview with three MPs, February 2012.

¹⁶ “Oppozitsiya provela miting v Oshe i prigrozila povtornymi protestami.” *Kloop.kg*. March 1, 2012.

¹⁷ Scott Radnitz. 2010. *Weapons of the Wealthy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

while “abstract political principles” played a marginal role. Opposition forces outside of the ruling regime mobilized their own villages and the apolitical masses to satisfy their materialist goals and to fuel their rise to power.

Following Akayev’s ouster, otherwise competing opposition leaders made an informal pact to install Bakiyev as head of state.¹⁸ At that time, Bakiyev was seen as a “consensus figure” who could maintain the balance among various opposition leaders without grabbing too much power himself. His job was to live up to the expectations of other competing players who made the 2005 regime change possible. Most of the “Tulip Revolution” leaders, however, were soon disappointed, as Bakiyev managed to centralize power in his hands within a few months of becoming president. In 2008-10, his control over state and society was comparable to that exercised by Emomali Rakhmon in Tajikistan.¹⁹ Greed, and not an attempt to balance between former political allies, motivated Bakiyev’s cabinet members as they extorted resources from entrepreneurs and politicians alike. Starting from 2008, the only way for an individual to hold onto a business enterprise or a public position was to join Bakiyev’s Ak-Jol party. At the same time, his son Maxim was in charge of all financial inflows, including foreign aid, investment, and revenues, as he was being groomed to eventually succeed his father.²⁰

Existing studies of Kyrgyzstan’s political development have shown how both under Akayev’s and Bakiyev’s leadership, powerful political elites used horizontal and vertical patronage networks to either bargain for the best deal with the ruling regime or to form a formidable opposition. Engvall demonstrates how Kyrgyzstan’s state institutions functioned according to informal relations. He argues that, under both leaders, the state in Kyrgyzstan was organized as a “marketplace” where most positions were acquired through bribes and other forms of corruption. In this environment politicians want immediate returns from their investments, so most public funds are squandered and few social services are provided to the public.²¹

The post-2005 experience had a powerful impact on these informal networks following Bakiyev’s ouster in April 2010. Instead of relying on a single individual to manage the state, leaders of the 2010 regime change were convinced that only early corrections in the overall political system

¹⁸ Interviews with numerous opposition leaders who sought Akayev’s ouster during 2005-2009.

¹⁹ According to Freedom House, in 2010 Kyrgyzstan’s democracy score was 6.21 compared to Tajikistan’s 6.14.

²⁰ “Roza Otunbayeva: ‘Bakiyevshchina obrashchaetsya so stranoi kak s biznes-kompaniy.’” *Fergana.ru*. March 3, 2010.

²¹ Engvall. “Flirting with State Failure.”

would ensure the fair representation of all players.²² That is, whereas Bakiyev was a consensus choice among competing political players after the 2005 revolution, the winners in 2010 distributed power through the adoption of a new constitution and the appointment of Roza Otunbayeva for a two-year “transitional presidency.” Importantly, the consensus was a rational choice among Interim Government members on the new rules of power sharing, rather than an ideological accord. Politicians sought to preserve individual powers and interests by means of gaining seats in the parliament and appointing the government.

Between the collapse of the Bakiyev regime and the October 2010 parliamentary elections, the Interim Government—comprised of former opposition leaders—was deeply divided about the course the country should take. Competition, suspicions, and personal intrigues plagued the interim leaders, with each trying to insert their own cadres into the new government. While Otunbayeva enjoyed the support of many in Bishkek and beyond, most of the decisions made by the provisional government were made without her knowledge. She often served as a mediator for competing interests.²³ As McGlinchey argues, most of the competing elites rely on the power of their local constituents and are ready and willing to create chaos if needed to prevail on the national political scene.²⁴

At the time, Omurbek Tekebayev, head of the Ata-Meken party and the main author of the new constitution, was one of the most popular politicians in Kyrgyzstan and represented a formidable challenge to others in the Interim Government.²⁵ Tekebayev had developed the new constitutional framework during Bakiyev’s reign as a reaction to the president’s ability to quickly consolidate power by creating a one-party system.²⁶ However, his ideas would not have prevailed without the consent of other key players in the Interim Government. Tekebayev’s version of the constitution provided equal opportunities for all party leaders at the forefront of the 2010 regime change. Thus, Tekebayev’s plan was seen as a genuine effort to share power with other players.

Most leaders of the provisional government were popular in their local precincts, but lacked the support of the broader population. Some of them threatened to use the power of the masses to pressure rivals who tried to grab too much influence over the design of the new system. In a leaked May 2010 phone conversation between General Prosecutor Azimbek

²² Interview with member of Interim Government, Bishkek, April 2010.

²³ Interview with former member of the Interim Government, Bishkek, July 2010.

²⁴ Eric McGlinchey. 2011. *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

²⁵ Tekebayev claims that Ata-Meken earned a majority of votes in the December 2008 parliamentary elections, surpassing Bakiyev’s Ak-Jol party.

²⁶ Conversation with Omurbek Tekebayev, Washington, DC, December 2008.

Beknazarov and acting Economics Minister Almazbek Atambayev, the politicians exchanged threats and personal attacks. Beknazarov warned that he could gather his supporters in Bishkek and oust the Interim Government, while Atambayev told him not to threaten him with things like revolutions. "Hey, my friend," Beknazarov calmly replied, "you know that I can arrange a third revolution if the need arises." Atambayev brushed aside this saber-rattling, "Maybe you scare someone else, but you don't scare me!" The politicians then discussed a US\$400,000 bribe allegedly paid for a prestigious government position.²⁷

It is in this environment that major political players welcomed the new constitution and agreed to participate in fair and competitive elections and thus legitimize their state roles. The major players did not have a long-term democratic plan for the country, but instead sought to create a regulatory system that would pre-empt a repeat of the "winner-take-all" situation seen in 2005. Members of the Interim Government most likely had only a very basic understanding about what constitutes democratic governance and why Kyrgyzstan needs it. More than free elections, they wanted to preserve their own power and avoid the uncertainty that accompanies a regime change through mass unrest.

The May 2010 constitution was designed specifically to make formal rules supersede the informal. In essence, the new constitution seeks to prevail over patrimonial practices in politics and business in Kyrgyzstan. It also seeks to reduce or eliminate the possibility of another violent regime change. The constitutional provisions ensure that no single leader or political force is able to centralize power to such a degree that he would not hand over power if he lost the next election.

Three provisions are especially important in this sense. First, parliament has become stronger than the presidency. Parliament cannot be dissolved unless two-thirds of the MPs agree to resign. Second, no one party can receive more than 60 percent of all seats in the parliament no matter how many votes it receives. This provision protects the parliament from the emergence of a powerful pro-presidential party and the majority party or coalition faces a strong opposition faction. The constitution ensures that opposition members chair the parliamentary committees on the budget and law enforcement. The parliamentary minority can also nominate its own candidates for ministerial positions. Finally, an elected president can serve only one six-year term.

The new constitution has created the necessary conditions for competitive elections and the development of a ruling coalition. Following the upheaval of April 2010, there was no single political party that was

²⁷ "A. Atambayev: Inostrannye spetssluzhby i 'bakievsty' proslushivayut telefonnyye razgovory chlenov VP." *Ata-meken.kg*, May 26, 2010, http://www.atamekenkg.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2961:-lr- (accessed July 27, 2012).

able to prevail in the electoral process by gaining the support of the acting president or Interim Government. Unsurprisingly, the 2010 parliamentary elections were dominated by veteran political players who managed to cluster in new or old political parties. In effect, old players competed in the 2010 elections according to new rules.

Post-Election Party-Building

Kyrgyzstan held one constitutional referendum and two elections between 2010 and 2012. Despite instability in southern Kyrgyzstan, the June 2010 referendum²⁸ on the new constitution took place amid relative calm across the country.²⁹ Later that year, on October 10, Kyrgyzstan held the first genuinely competitive and free parliamentary elections in Central Asia's post-Soviet history. The OSCE gave the vote its highest rating, emphasizing that the Central Election Commission's work was genuinely "impartial and independent," and all political parties with candidates had equal access to the media.³⁰ Kyrgyzstan held presidential elections in October 2011.³¹

To run in the 2010 parliamentary elections, parties needed to compose a list of 100 members, with at least 30 percent female candidates and ethnic minorities. Mathematically, since the constitution caps single-party representation at 60 percent of seats in the 120-member parliament, this meant that the first 72 names on the party list had a realistic chance of obtaining a parliamentary seat. On election day, 29 parties competed and five crossed the nation-wide 5 percent threshold needed to win seats in the parliament. Ironically, the loosely regulated political environment in Kyrgyzstan allowed parties opposed to the Interim Government, such as Ata-Jurt, Ar-Namys and Respublika, to win seats, while some Interim Government candidates did not succeed.

Given these results, the party parliamentary factions faced the challenge of forming a ruling coalition that would accommodate the interests of

²⁸ The referendum received a positive evaluation from the OSCE and is perhaps the most transparent and orderly referendum that has taken place in Kyrgyzstan. Some Kyrgyz experts, however, claim that most people in Kyrgyzstan voted for stability and were familiar with only the basic elements in the new constitution.

²⁹ Roughly 70 percent of the people voted and 90 percent supported the new constitution, *www.akipress.kg*, June 28, 2010.

³⁰ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2010, Election Observation Mission, Parliamentary Elections, Kyrgyz Republic 2010, "Interim Report No. 2, September 14-27, 2010," 1 October <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/71580> (accessed July 27, 2012). A report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) confirms that except for a few cases, all political parties had equal access to the mass media. Despite a shortage of staff at the Central Election Commission, few complaints about preparations for the elections were filed.

³¹ Kyrgyzstan's presidential elections also received largely positive evaluations, but the winner's rivals alleged fraud. For more see: "PM Atambayev wins Kyrgyzstan presidential elections." *BBC*. October 31, 2011 (accessed July 27, 2012).

political leaders who otherwise would not collaborate because of personal enmity. The first attempt to form a coalition failed because Ata-Jurt members voted against Tekebayev's bid for the parliamentary speaker position. Encouraged by their success in the parliamentary elections, Ata-Jurt and Ar-Namys now staunchly rejected the new constitution and felt empowered to challenge Tekebayev in the parliament. They warned about the possible instability that such a system could bring to Kyrgyzstan and argued that a popular, visionary leader is needed to hold the country together. As time passed, however, and the ongoing divisions diminished their leverage in parliament, the party leaders' views changed accordingly, and both became pro-active supporters of a stronger parliament. Ata-Jurt held the parliamentary speaker's position for almost a year, while intra-party splits weakened Ar-Namys, forcing it to enter alliances with other forces and stop demanding prestigious government posts for its supporters. This outcome shows that when Kyrgyzstan's major political forces feel threatened by stronger alliances in the parliament, they will insist that the political system be more decentralized and better regulated.

The October 2010 elections where every political faction could participate have helped to identify the strongest forces in the country and propel them into the state apparatus. That is, unlike during Bakiyev's regime when opposition leaders were stripped of political power within his first two years of leadership, a wide spectrum of political forces gained representation in the parliament and the government, leaving only those unable to cross the 5 percent threshold outside the state structures.

Based on my interviews and observations, there are three types of party members in the five factions. The first and largest category includes incumbent MPs who were eager to win reelection in 2010 and their close allies who wanted to obtain a public office. This category mainly consists of party leaders or the top five members on the party lists.³² These are typically influential politicians and owners of large businesses in their district. The members of this group are accustomed to using public office to retain and multiply their wealth regardless of constitutional changes or the configuration of the top leadership in the country. This group's members likely paid US\$50,000-US\$250,000 to major party leaders to join the top party ranks.³³ The two new parties—Respublika and Ata-Jurt—formed only months before the elections and were infamous for selling party-list slots for extravagant prices.³⁴ Other parties, however, were also known for selling party list slots.

Importantly, however, the current parliament has fewer MPs accused of criminal activities than did earlier legislatures. Under Bakiyev's

³² Multiple interviews with Kyrgyz MPs and political observers, 2011-2.

³³ Interview with Kyrgyz MP, March 9, 2012.

³⁴ Interview with Respublika staffer, October 2010.

one-party system, dozens of MPs were alleged to have ties to the criminal underworld. Under the new system, only three current MPs are suspected of shady dealings, specifically coordinating drug trafficking operations in southern Kyrgyzstan. One of those three heads a faction and reportedly serves as *smotryaschii* (protector) for drug lords operating in the south.³⁵

The second group includes an “amorphous mass”³⁶ made up of smaller-scale entrepreneurs and former members of local governments who enjoy local popularity. This group also includes some representatives of ethnic minorities and female candidates who were put on the party list to satisfy constitutional requirements, but they were not expected to be active once elected.³⁷ The “amorphous mass” populates the majority of any faction and mostly votes along party lines. The “masses” are usually not informed about decisions made by the party leaders and are the last to find out about major intra-party splits. Some members of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), for instance, have met president Atambayev only at party gatherings; while Ata-Jurt MPs were kept in the dark about Tashiyev’s ouster as a party leader in June 2012.³⁸ One MP from SDPK said that he only twice had a chance to talk briefly with Atambayev since the parliamentary elections.³⁹

Finally, the third category includes “idealists,” the handful of MPs who are not necessarily driven by business interests, but who seek to implement policies that would bring change to the country as a whole. These people were invited to join parties because of their prior professional experience and intellectual ability. These groups often overlap—an “ideal-ist” can be guided by his or her business interests, while the “amorphous mass” may refuse to vote along party lines out of ideological convictions.

The high concentration of entrepreneur MPs, debates on economic issues, such as budgetary spending, privatization of strategic resources, tariffs, and key government posts, dominate parliamentary discussions. These issues tend to spawn inter-faction coalitions that expect the “amorphous masses” to fall in line. To preserve their own value in the party ranks, the “masses” MPs mostly cater to their local constituencies by helping their native villages to celebrate cultural events, distributing individual scholarships, and helping those in the most need—usually elders and orphans.⁴⁰ Since becoming politically active, one MP with most of his business ventures concentrated in Bishkek has been actively engaged in

³⁵ Alexander Zelichenko, director of Central Asian Drug Policy Center, presentation at George Mason University, February 21, 2012.

³⁶ I borrowed this definition from one of the MPs who preferred to remain unnamed.

³⁷ Parties must meet quotas dictating female and ethnic minority representation.

³⁸ Interviews with SDPK and Ata-Jurt MPs, Bishkek, May-June 2012.

³⁹ Interview, Bishkek, June 2012.

⁴⁰ Interviews with several MPs, Bishkek, May 2012.

his father's native village by regularly investing his own funds into various local projects.⁴¹ By doing so, MPs like him seek to secure local votes in the next election.

By contrast, local concerns, such as proposals to fix windows at a local school or celebrate a special anniversary of a local poet, dominate parliamentary discussions among less economically influential MPs who seek to satisfy the needs of local constituencies.⁴² According to Dastan Bekeshev, an MP from Ar-Namys, during the first 18 month of the current session, parliament adopted only 20-25 laws related to substantive national concerns, while as many as 1,000 laws either concerned local matters or were procedural in nature (changed terminology, definitions of terms, etc.). In effect, the most vital and long-term legislative acts, such as the state budget, economic reforms, security policy, and new regulations and institutions, are exclusively introduced, promoted, and approved by either financially powerful MPs or the "idealists." At times, wealthier MPs use financial incentives to encourage members of the "amorphous mass" to support bills that positively affect their parochial interests.

Lacking succinct political programs, party coalition-building efforts do not follow any predictable path, but rather reflect the ability of top leaders to negotiate agreements. For the most part these agreements involve the allocation of key government posts and chairmanships of parliamentary committees. The stability of these coalitions, as well as their relations with the opposition, are often impossible to predict because several business or political interests might coalesce at once during a discussion of any particular bill or regulation. As O'Dwyer describes the East European experience: "Instead of internally coherent and program-matically defined parties, one finds heterogeneous coalitions. Instead of predictable coalition-building, one finds marriages of convenience."⁴³

The only formal accountability mechanism that the parties have once the coalition forms is the constitutional requirement to hold early elections should the factions be unable to form a coalition in three attempts. The fear that the parliament will be dissolved and new elections called as a result of political intrigues and public anger has been constant since election day.⁴⁴

Despite initial worries, however, Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary experiment has been surprisingly stable during its first two years. MPs have debated important issues from competing perspectives. The parliament has provided a forum for the country's most powerful players to settle their own regional differences and conflicting interests. To a large extent, the

⁴¹ Interview, MP, Bishkek, June 2012.

⁴² Dastan Bekeshev, Ar-Namys party MP. Interview, March 2012; personal observations.

⁴³ O'Dwyer, 25.

⁴⁴ Interview with 10 Kyrgyz MPs representing all five parties in the parliament, Washington, DC, February 2012.

institution has eased competition over economic resources among players who otherwise would choose to destabilize the state to reach their goals. As a result, the legislative branch has cast a spotlight on various political and business alliances within the parliament. In effect, political leaders who played according to the new rules during the elections and won parliamentary seats were forced to learn to survive in the region's most transparent post-election environment. Over the long-term, powerful players' eagerness to strengthen regulations for competition may lead to greater political stability and even strengthen the formal bureaucracy.⁴⁵

The new constitution triggered a need for new parliamentary procedures. Kyrgyz MPs had to learn how to make a floor statement within two minutes, how to talk to journalists, and how to build coalitions. The parliamentary sessions are now broadcast live on TV and radio. Partly as a reaction to the suddenly increased demand for openness, MPs have sought to limit freedom of speech and ban political criticism. In June 2011, the parliament issued a decree aiming at regulating interethnic relations by controlling the media and restricting the emergence of "monoethnic communities." According to 95 of the total 120 MPs who voted for the decree, this would help maintain stability in the country.

Presidential Elections and the Recentralization of Power

After winning the October 2011 presidential elections, Atambayev sought to recentralize power by ensuring that the new coalition includes SPDK and Respublika, which is led by Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov. Although Kyrgyzstan is a parliamentary state with five competing parties represented in parliament, MPs nevertheless have supported most of Atambayev's initiatives since his inauguration in December 2011. A few weeks after the president's inauguration, a new coalition was formed that included all parliamentary factions, except for Ata-Jurt. Reportedly, Ata-Meken's was particularly against Ata-Jurt's inclusion into the coalition.⁴⁶

To boost their party's influence, Ata-Jurt's leaders chose to ally with Madumarov's Butun Kyrgyzstan party, which had no parliamentary representation in February 2012. Both Ata-Jurt's head Kamchybek Tashiyev and Madumarov draw most of their popularity from the ethnic Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan. In their statement announcing their alliance, Tashiyev and Madumarov presented a joint vision of the country's development and pledged their readiness to tighten control over government economic policy. However, both men competed in the presidential elections, splitting

⁴⁵ Similar dynamics can be seen in African states in the 1980s, Daniel C. Bach, 2011. "Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism: Comparative Trajectories and Readings." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49:3, 275-294.

⁴⁶ Diana Rakhmanova. "Pravyashchaya koalitsiya raspalas', novaya mozhet stat' 'shire'." *Kloop.kg*, December 2, 2011 (accessed June 23, 2012).

their constituencies, allowing another candidate to prevail. Their decisions to seek the presidency were largely irrational from the point of view of their voters. Yet, both realized that even if they did not win the presidency, any votes they garnered would boost their popularity for the near future. If the new bloc had survived, it could have potentially changed the electoral dynamics in the country.

Seeing Ata-Jurt's popularity waning, Tashiyev and his fellow party members have been calling for the dissolution of the current parliament and new elections. According to Ata-Jurt's parliamentary bloc, over 70 percent of the population in Kyrgyzstan does not support the parliament.⁴⁷ Tashiyev also called for changing the constitution back to the 1993 version that granted, according to him, more powers to the parliament than the 2010 revision.⁴⁸ For Butun, the alliance with Ata-Jurt was the only way to maintain the party's influence in politics. Madumarov has demonstrated his considerable political skills by rallying thousands of people to support his candidacy and staging anti-government protests for days on end. Despite their efforts, Ata-Jurt and Butun's alliance soon fell apart and in June 2012 Tashiyev lost his party leadership position.

By mid-2012, most parties have seen formal splits within their ranks. Along with Ata-Jurt, two other parties within the ruling coalition, Ata-Meken and Ar-Namys, face internal divides. Ar-Namys dropped the formerly influential Felix Kulov from its top leadership in an effort to improve the coherence inside its ranks. The party's popular informal leader, economist Akylbek Japarov, might replace Kulov. Ata-Meken, in turn, excluded some of its key members from party lists because of their disagreement with the party's leadership.⁴⁹

Regardless of the intraparty divisions, most influential MPs still strive to join or create an alliance outside of the direct control of the president. The shifts are occurring as part of an effort to raise the profile of some MPs prior to the next election cycle. The same familiar faces are likely to run in the 2014 parliamentary elections (if indeed the parliament is not dissolved earlier), but as part of more coherent and determined party formations. In this case, the next parliament is likely to be strong enough to prevent the president from usurping power, as happened with Bakiyev and Akayev. In this scenario, the constitution of 2010 will continue to govern competition among various business cliques, idealists, and regional alignments. All five factions are thinking one electoral cycle ahead, hoping to consolidate their positions in advance of 2014.

⁴⁷ Discussion with 10 MPs, Embassy of Kyrgyzstan, February 6, 2012.

⁴⁸ "Kamchybek Tashiyev zayavil o provedenii mnogotysyachnogo mitinga v Oshe v marte." *Knews.kg*, February 22, 2012 (accessed June 23, 2012).

⁴⁹ "Deputatov parlamenta Kyrgyzstana Omurbeka Abdyrakhmanova i Ravshana Dzheebekova iskluchat iz fraktsii Ata-Meken," *www.24.kg*, February 21, 2012 (accessed June 23, 2012).

Domestic Pressures to Fight Patronage

Kyrgyzstan's competitive, yet regulated political environment has contributed to greater transparency in some parts of the political domain. On several occasions MPs and government officials have exposed corrupt schemes used by the former regime, as well as current cases of corruption. Non-state entrepreneurs and civil society actors have sought to overcome neopatrimonial networks within the state bureaucracy by exposing how parliamentarians and top government officials lack the knowledge about what it takes to create a nation-wide market economy.

Entrepreneurs in Bishkek often complain that greater transparency has not led to a genuine rule of law regime in Kyrgyzstan. A year after the April 2010 regime change, the Bishkek Business Club (BBC) expressed its members' frustration that, despite the new constitution, the state bureaucracy is still a corrupt "relic of the old regime" that stifles "progressive ideas." The government is still incompetent and prevents the "free development of individuals and organizations." Corruption, lawlessness, and leadership based on patronage violate the property and constitutional rights of citizens. This situation has led to the "concentration of financial, informational and administrative resources in the hands of a small group of people and this will have consequences in the future."⁵⁰ Of particular concern are companies where the state owns shares. Rather than supporting the public good, these shares often serve the interests of the Ministry of State Property and the State Financial Oversight agency.⁵¹ These companies, according to the BBC, must be governed by independently-elected boards of trustees that would prioritize business ideas ahead of government interests.

In an effort to push the parliament and government toward transparency, in early 2012 BBC launched a "100 Days" campaign that traced how the recommendations of various political action committees were implemented. The main goal of the campaign was to help policymakers find a viable economic strategy.⁵² The club also exhorts Prime Minister Babanov, himself an influential entrepreneur, to work closely with the country's business community. Although the club's message is most apparent in and around Bishkek, many MPs believe it is waging a viable campaign that could lead to a new parliament.⁵³

⁵⁰ Aziz Abakirov. "Nachinayu kampaniyu 'Ya golosuyu protiv vsekh!'" https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=290122987672094 (accessed March 16, 2011).

⁵¹ Bakai Zhunusov. "BDK: nazrela ostraya neobkhodimost' reform korporativnogo upravleniya v kompaniyakh s gosdolei." https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=180713168645673 (accessed on March 1, 2012).

⁵² Uluk Kadyrbayev. "BDK vs. Gosudarstvo." *Vechernyi Bishkek*, February 9, 2012 (accessed June 23, 2012).

⁵³ Personal communication with 10 MPs, Washington, DC, January 2012. For more on

When she served as interim president, Otunbayeva spearheaded several initiatives to increase government transparency. The most significant of these was the creation of special Public Advisory Councils (PAC) that monitor the activities of all ministries, including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Interior—government bodies traditionally accused of serving a small elite at the top of the regime. The councils' members are made up of NGOs and independent observers. They have full access to all government records. For instance, council members overseeing the work of the Interior Ministry have received special permits allowing them to visit any detention facility. Although officials often refrain from directly responding to their critics, the PACs have nevertheless provided greater oversight to some of the ministries' work. In effect, the councils represent an added measure to protect the state from patronage links and expose instances of decision-making based on subversive interests or familial ties.

Furthermore, the Fuel and Energy Sector Transparency Initiative, created at Otunbayeva's request in 2010 to oversee the work of the hydro-power sector, has considerably increased the transparency of the country's most vital income-generating industry.⁵⁴ Customers are encouraged to stop stealing energy by installing accurate meters, while the government's investment plans into the sector are scrutinized and made public. This arrangement could potentially increase public trust in government policy for this sector, lead to efficient privatization, and attract much-needed foreign investment. The initiative marks a significant milestone in the hydropower sector after Bakiyev's downfall.

According to Transparency International, Kyrgyzstan's corruption perception index has slightly improved since 2010, moving from 2.0 to 2.1 (on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being the worst). At the same time, however, the World Bank's *Doing Business 2012* report indicates that Kyrgyzstan has slipped three positions since 2010, and is now ranked 70th among 183 economies. The country scores particularly low in terms of "paying taxes" and "resolving insolvency."

To a large degree, Kyrgyzstan's civil society activists, mostly based in Bishkek, are better equipped to lead a political debate, formulate a critique of public policy, and organize collective action than are the political parties. Financed by major international donors, NGO leaders also have a deeper understanding of the concepts of human rights and democracy. Compared to the handful of such informed civic leaders, public officials and MPs often lack even the most basic understanding

Babanov's business empire in Kyrgyzstan, see Bermet Bukasheva. "Kto takoi Omurbek Babanov." *Fergana.ru*, December 6, 2010 (accessed June 23, 2012).

⁵⁴ Nate Schenkkan. "Kyrgyzstan: Energy-Sector Reforms Show Promise, If Sustained." *Eurasianet*. October 21, 2011 (accessed June 23, 2012).

of a properly functioning administration and the importance of standard operating procedures. Most MPs and government officials have a formal education unrelated to public administration, while some lack university degrees altogether. The few schools in Bishkek that offer degrees in law, economics, and public administration lack the resources required to equip students for public office. At the same time, civil-society activists are not interested in holding political office because public sector positions offer far less pay than can be found in the third sector. Civil society groups have learned entrepreneurialism from sources outside of Kyrgyzstan, and they rarely control any local businesses.

Conclusions

Over the past two years in Kyrgyzstan, informal political dealings eventually yielded to formal regulations, resulting in a more predictable and more coherent political process. The constitution adopted after the April 2010 regime change imposed regulations on patrimonial relations, and thereby played a stabilizing role in the country. The floor of the parliament has turned into the primary battleground for the country's major economic and political players. Although this "parliamentary experiment" has not led to effective policies or reduced corruption so far, it has introduced rules for competition in order to avoid the concentration of power in the hands of one political leader or patrimonial network. But a lingering sense that chaos could easily return and uncertainty about the ultimate goal of the current political competition continues to be a strong motivating force pushing politicians to seek a more regulated political process.

The new regulated political environment in Kyrgyzstan, although dominated by neopatrimonial interests, has nevertheless produced the first signs of genuine political debate and fair competition. To demonstrate their ability to win votes in parliament, MP candidates had to prove they are capable of offering viable policies during the elections. Should this trend continue, the party- and coalition-building processes that have taken place since the 2010 elections will yield a more sophisticated political landscape in time for the next election. At least two of the parties currently represented in parliament will likely either disintegrate or change leadership before the next elections, presumably creating stronger, more cohesive parties based on shared views and interests. In the next elections, the factions will have a stronger core. Unlike in 2010, it will be difficult for new parties to compete for seats unless they ally with one of the five parties now gaining experience in working under the new constitution. The party-building process will be at a more advanced stage with an identifiable active ideological core for each party.

In the best-case scenario, such regulated neopatrimonialism will

continue to prevent Kyrgyzstan from turning into a one-party authoritarian state. The Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European experiences have shown that patronage networks, if regulated, can yield robust state systems.⁵⁵ Party competition is a key factor for disciplining powerful actors because it forces them to try to meet voter expectations. In an environment of transparency, the leaders of untainted political parties may eventually push aside reportedly corrupt leaders. Finding the “right” amount of competition, a level that does not lead to frequent government reshuffling and early elections, will help strengthen public administration.

In a more pessimistic scenario, if the parliament is dissolved, a centralized presidency reemerges, or informal links prevail over formal regulations, this constitutional experiment will lead to even more hollow institutions and a stronger reliance on patronage networks. In either case, the changed political landscape will make it hard to realign all political parties under the umbrella of one party or one leader, and any politician who tries to do so will be checked by other members of the neopatrimonial alliances that still flourish within parliament.

⁵⁵ O'Dwyer, 7.